

***What is claimed is:***

1. An arrangement for transmitting electronic updates/alerts over a data network to a plurality of data network system users, the arrangement comprising:  
a website update/alert administrator, coupled to the data network, for receiving update or alert messages from said network, said website update/alert administrator including a database of instant messaging (IM) groups and a listing targeting various IM groups to associate with different types of updates and alerts, the administrator including a transmission element for sending an automated IM to each member of each targeted IM group, the automated IM including the update/alert message information.
2. The arrangement of claim 1 wherein the website update/alert administrator further includes a listing of email addresses for each member of each IM group, wherein an email version of an update/alert is sent if a member is not involved in the IM session at the time the automated IM is sent.
3. The arrangement of claim 2 wherein the email version of the update/alert requests an acknowledge reply from each IM group member receiving the email version of the update/alert.
4. The arrangement of claim 1 wherein the automated IM includes a trailer portion indicating that the IM is "automated" and "cannot be responded to".
5. The arrangement of claim 1 wherein the automated IM includes a request for acknowledge of receipt by each IM group member to confirm that each member of the IM group has received the update/alert.
6. A method of transmitting update/alert messages over a data network to a plurality of data network system users, the method comprising the steps of:
  - a) receiving, at a website administrator, an update/alert message to be sent to a plurality of system users,

- b) using the message information, retrieving a targeted listing of IM groups to whom the update/alert message should be sent; and
- c) transmitting the update/alert message as an automated IM to each member of each targeted IM group.

7. The method as defined in claim 6 wherein the method further comprises the steps of:

- d) determining if any members of any targeted groups are not involved in the IM session at the time the automated IM is sent; and, if so,
- e) retrieving the email address of each user not involved in the IM session; and
- f) transmitting an email version of the automated IM to each user not involved in the IM session.

8. The method as defined in claim 7 wherein the transmitted email version includes a request for each user to transmit a confirmation reply message.

9. The method as defined in claim 6 wherein the automated IM message transmitted in step c) includes a trailer portion indicating that the message is “automated” and “cannot be responded to”.

10. The method as defined in claim 6 wherein the automated IM message transmitted in step c) includes a request to acknowledge receipt of the message by each IM group member by transmitting a confirmation reply message to the website administrator.

11. The method as defined in claim 10 wherein the method further comprises the step of:

- g) associating each received acknowledgement with a proper IM group member to determine which IM groups have received the update/alert and which IM group members have not received the update/alert.